

Healthy caribou herds mean healthy Northerners

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The decline of Canada's barren-ground caribou herds is being felt across the North. Eight out of Canada's 13 herds are decreasing, and many are down over 90 percent from historical highs. The Bathurst herd, once among Canada's largest at almost half a million animals, is now down to less than 20,000. Nunavut's Baffin Island herd has dwindled from 100,000 caribou in the 1990s to approximately 5,000 today.

Barren-ground caribou populations rise and fall as part of their natural cycle, but today there are added pressures that are preventing herds from rebounding: a changing climate, growing industrial development and an increased human presence in the North, to name a few.

The health of barren-ground caribou is intrinsically tied to the health and wellness of Northern communities. They provide a nutritious, lean food source in places where food costs are high. Skins are still used for clothing and bedding, and bones and antlers for handicrafts. Cultural practices are kept alive by teaching youth to hunt caribou responsibly. Following in the footsteps of their Elders ties them to the traditions of their past. Availability of caribou is essential for maintaining the strong traditional, cultural and spiritual relationship between the land, animals and Indigenous peoples, as well as the connection between generations of caribou-using peoples.

In addition to having priceless cultural value, caribou also represent a significant portion of the Northern economy. The Beverly and Qamanirjuaq caribou harvest alone provided a net value of \$20 million in 2005-2006, according to a 2008 evaluation commissioned by the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board (BQCMB). As a renewable resource, caribou could provide an ongoing, annual source of nutritious food for Northern communities, if the herds are properly managed, with an economic value over decades of many hundreds of millions of dollars.

Setting the Stage for Recovery

Giving barren-ground caribou herds the relief they need to foster recovery will be most effective if it comes from trust and a strong working relationship between all interests, including governments and individual hunters.

In December 2016, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed all barren-ground caribou in Canada as "Threatened," a designation that means the species "is likely to become endangered if nothing is done."

In April 2017, the Northwest Territories (NWT) Species at Risk Committee followed suit with the same recommended designation for barren-ground caribou in the NWT (excluding the Porcupine caribou herd), adding that the pressures on caribou from climate change and human activity are "unprecedented."

The next steps are for Environment and Climate Change Minister Catherine McKenna to list barren-ground caribou in Canada as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), triggering the development of a national recovery strategy and action plan to protect the species from further declines, and for the NWT Conference of Management Authorities to begin consultations on listing barren-ground caribou in the NWT (excluding the Porcupine caribou herd) under the *Species at Risk (NWT) Act*.

At the territorial level, nowhere will the potential for conservation of caribou habitat be greater than in the finalization of the Nunavut Land Use Plan. Though many barren-ground caribou herds use habitat in more than one territory or province during their seasonal migrations each year, most of the major herds have their calving grounds in Nunavut.

Traditional knowledge holders and biologists agree that one of the most important steps that can be taken to help maintain healthy herds, and encourage the recovery of declining herds, is to protect calving grounds from disturbance.



Photo credit: World Wildlife Fund

*Barren-ground caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*) from the Qamanirjuaq herd migrating near Enmadai Lake, Nunavut.*

The subject is likely to be a major focus of the Nunavut Planning Commission (NPC) hearing in the Kivalliq and Kitikmeot regions. Many organizations are planning to attend in the hopes of convincing the NPC to keep the calving ground protections proposed in the 2016 draft land use plan.

Doing so is unlikely to hinder the massive economic benefits found in mining and other development projects in the territory. Of the more than 241,000 square kilometres of land identified as having high mineral potential in Nunavut, 75 percent is outside of the protected areas proposed for caribou calving and post-calving habitat.

Protecting calving grounds in the Nunavut Land Use Plan, as opposed to evaluating projects on a case-by-case basis, also provides clarity for industry when they are in the project planning stage. Clear boundaries allow developers to simply design projects around sensitive caribou habitat, instead of throwing considerable time and resources into a development proposal, only to have it ultimately rejected based on its proximity to calving and post-calving areas. This recently happened to a major mine proposal in Nunavut.

Survey Says: Protect Calving Grounds

The vast majority of Northerners agree that calving grounds should be off-limits to development, according to a recent survey conducted by Environics on behalf of World Wildlife Fund Canada. The survey polled over 150 residents of Nunavut, Yukon and Northwest Territories, and asked whether respondents supported or opposed making caribou calving grounds in Canada's North fully protected areas that do not allow industrial activities such as oil and gas or mining exploration and development.

Respondents were asked to identify their cultural identity, to ensure the sample was representative of the cultural diversity of the territories.

A large majority (89 percent) of those surveyed supported protecting caribou calving grounds, with over three quarters saying they strongly supported full protection.

The remaining responses were spread equally between somewhat opposing and strongly opposing full protection.

Concern about caribou population declines was the top reason (53 percent) why respondents felt protections were needed. Other reasons included cari-



Janet Ishalook and her son Joabie cutting up caribou harvested by Alex Ishalook for his family near their community of Arviat, Nunavut in June 2015, with the coast of Hudson Bay in the background.

bou as an important source of food and clothing for the people of the North (29 percent), and the importance of protecting Northern cultures and ways of life (15 percent).

These survey results are consistent with positions on calving ground protection stated by numerous Indigenous organizations representing harvesters across the barren-ground caribou ranges. These include all three Nunavut regional wildlife boards, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, hunters and trappers' organizations throughout Nunavut, the BQCMB, the Tłı̄chǝ Government, the Government of the Northwest Territories, two renewable resources co-management boards in the NWT, and other Dene and Métis organizations from the NWT, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Making a Difference at the Community Level

Promoting respectful caribou harvest, harvest reporting, and limiting disruptions to caribou habitat will be the most important lines of defence for caribou recovery.

Earlier this year, the BQCMB began an innovative approach to a classic media campaign in support of conservation of the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq herds. The campaign, funded by WWF-Canada, is called *You Can Make a Difference – Caribou for the Future*.

Created by Northern people for Northern people, this campaign features the new element of targeting youth with a series of short videos that could be easily shared on social media. Increasing knowledge of and support for caribou conservation by youth will go a long way to ensuring the herds will be there for future generations.

Conventional methods of communication are also part of the campaign. Hard copies of posters, fact sheets, and videos on DVDs ensure users of more traditional media will also get the message. These materials will be distributed by the BQCMB to communities across the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq caribou ranges, including schools, hunters' and trappers' organizations, and First Nation's offices. A poster contest starting in Kivalliq communities on the caribou range this fall will also be used to promote the materials and encourage conversations about caribou conservation by students and their families.

However, support for caribou conservation alone will not reduce pressure on the herds, which is why the BQCMB has focused its campaign on what has often been a missing piece for many hunters, particularly those young or inexperienced. The campaign answers the question, "What can I do?"

Several tips are provided for promoting respect-

ful harvest, from how to line up a shot, to selecting bulls, to the proper way to pack the meat in a sled so it doesn't spoil on the way back to the community. These individual actions are designed to help minimize wastage and cultivate a longstanding respect for the animal and its sacrifice.

Hunters are also encouraged to recognize and avoid calving grounds and post-calving grounds, and to keep the land clean to help provide a safe environment for cows to have their young.

"The calving ground is like a hospital for the caribou," says Alex Ishalook, BQCMB member for Arviat, in the video. "It's nice and clean, it's nice and quiet, there's special plants, there's special habitat. Our Elders and local people have always told us to keep the land clean. Don't build cabins, houses, even set up tents in that area, because it's special."

The campaign also goes beyond individual action by targeting companies who operate across the caribou ranges, including those involved with aircraft charters, tourism, mineral exploration and development, expediting, and environmental consulting to industry, with information about cumulative effects on caribou and habitat. The hope is that companies will think more carefully about how they operate on the land, and consult more with communities and Indigenous organizations when projects are in the design stage.

A Long Road Ahead

The effort to protect barren-ground caribou and their habitat is impressive in its comprehensiveness. The importance of the species to the health and wellness of the land and the people is clear from the community level, all the way up to COSEWIC's recommendation for a "Threatened" designation.

But there is still work to be done, and important opportunities that could make the difference for safeguarding the future health and longevity of caribou in Canada's North. Final hearings on the Nunavut Land Use Plan are taking place in the Kivalliq and Kitikmeot regions. This fall, the Government of Canada will have the opportunity to start a national recovery strategy by listing barren-ground caribou under SARA, and a similar opportunity exists to start a recovery process at the territorial level for eight herds in the NWT. Educating hunters about responsible harvest practices and the importance of harvest reporting will help community members make a difference on the ground.

There is an opportunity to get it right when it comes to caribou conservation in Canada. The only thing left to do is to take it. ●

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